

Excerpt from a letter to a friend 10/31/62

The whole week from Wednesday, October 17th -- when I was (contrary to the Observer's information) brought into the consultations) through October 24th when I got back from Europe, and for the rest of that week and the week-end, when the amazing minuet with Moscow went on, belong in my experience in the days around Pearl Harbor and June 25, 1950. One does not often weigh and advise upon considerations of just that magnitude. I saw and talked with JFK. He had my fullest sympathy and my admiration. I wondered in those days whether he had even dreamed that the Presidency might be like that. As you can imagine the spectrum of force in the proposals seriously considered ran from that of the blockade, as finally put into effect, (called a quarantine to the Chancellor's infinite disgust) to and through a series of military actions, from destroying the weapons on up. Here judgment turned on the balance one reached between the effectiveness of the action considered and one's estimate of the counter action it would (and might) provoke. It was interesting -- and sometimes surprising, to see where and how some people ended up. Fortunately, there has not been a rush to the press to claim or deny various positions as having been taken. So I won't start it.

We are, of course, not at, or apparently near, a solution yet. I keep reminding Rusk that he and I ought to know more about the long and tortuous path of the Korean Armistice talks than nearly any one else alive, and that if any one has profited from that tough lesson it should be we. I ask him to keep it constantly in mind. But I'm not sure that he does. If Castro is now to be given the role of holding things up, on one pretext or any other, while K ramps up an attack on all U.S. bases abroad, I should strongly urge that we take all missile and air weapons out whatever their nature. All the earlier arguments against so drastic and decisive a step -- precipitating a violent reaction from Moscow -- would no longer be true. And we cannot allow Castro to make monkeys of us.

My interview with General DeGaulle was, as in April, 1961, satisfactory and impressive. He is a man of great force and high intelligence. This does not prevent him from being a damned nuisance from time to time, but he has what has almost disappeared from the world, the dignity which comes from complete confidence in his values and the calm of unshakable convictions. He feels no compulsion to be liked, to be friendly, to exude charm, or to "project an image." He is the kind of "hero as king" that Carlyle wrote about and everyone now, except me, makes fun of. I would like one, the next time those who run this universe, if any do, are turning out a few.

Back to the crisis. What was K up to? Three things.

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Back to the crisis. What was K up to? Three things, I think. (1) to increase his nuclear first strike capability by 50%, (2) to discredit the U.S. entirely in the Western Hemisphere, (3) to gain a bargaining point in the Cuban base for which we would have to pay a price which would discredit us in Europe and Asia. His risk was not great. His own prestige was not involved in the bloc countries because of his propaganda control. In Europe it could be restored by a crisis over Berlin. To me this emphasized the importance of destroying his bet before the game really started. Would he get mad and pull down the temple on himself and ourselves? Or would he know that the Cuban gambit was over? What would your choice have been? From now on, there is no argument for any but a very rough course.